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ABSTRACT

Almost 30 independent tribally-controlled colleges are chartered in a dozen states and Canada. It is essential that tribal college evaluators develop the cultural sensitivity to accept and respect the tribal college environment and develop an appreciation for the uniqueness of these institutions. Tribal colleges have unique missions, which include providing for the individualized occupational and education needs of their communities, preserving tribal language and culture, and providing successful learning experiences for a population without a traditional educational background. Through education, the tribes attempt to expand their economic base and increase the employability of members. Moreover, many students enter college needing remediation and most take longer than two years to finish an associate degree. Curricula also tend to focus on indigenous Native American philosophy and concepts, as well as tribal values and culture. The tribal tongue is frequently a major curriculum component. Other characteristics include the generally small size and enrollment of tribal institutions, the strong role of tribal policies and politics in college governance, and low levels of funding matched with creative ways of augmenting resources. Finally, most tribal colleges are located within the confines of a reservation serving geographically isolated and dispersed populations. This results in unusual facilities, site locations, and teaching methods. (KP)

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ACCREDITATION FACTORS UNIQUE TO TRIBAL COLLEGES

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American Indian controlled colleges possess common missions, serve identical student populations, are comparable in size, are similar in governance structure, are troubled with like financial woes and lack of support, share typically remote locations, and suffer from identically poor facilities. It is essential that consultant evaluators as well as potential Tribal College accreditation candidates become familiar with the unique characteristics of these institutions which may affect their consideration for accreditation.

Mission

Generally, tribal colleges have as their mission, some or all of the following four goals:

1. ***to provide for the individualized occupational and educational needs of the tribal communities they serve.***

   Through education, the tribes attempt to expand their economic base and increase employability in numerous ways. Their colleges are often concurrently charged with providing a competent workforce in diverse skill areas. For example, in Michigan, Bay Mills College trains office technology and business students, black jack dealers, heavy equipment operators, and tribal fisheries personnel. The education of tribal members in employment skill development, as well as their own culture represent equal priorities to most tribes. Woven throughout these college's programs, indigenous Native American philosophy and concepts are also offered in ways unique to each sponsoring tribe.

2. ***to preserve tribal language and culture:***

The Tribal tongue is the dominant language spoken at many homes. The native tribal language is frequently a major study component in the curriculum. Tribal culture and perceptions consistently remain the common thread of the every day life for the students and faculty. Elders are highly respected and influential throughout reservation life. Certain subjects are only taught at certain times of the year. Spirituality is a valued part of life. Tribal colleges are really extended family components of the reservation. Everyone is related to one another in some way.

3. ***to prepare students for lifelong learning:***

Often the experience of American Indian students during early years in the educational arena has not been a positive one. Part of the tribal college's purpose is to provide access to education and successful learning experiences in an environment where few role models are available. Most students enter these colleges lacking traditional educational backgrounds. Remediation is a vital component in raising students skill levels to cope with college texts and theories.

These colleges also frequently prepare students to transfer to further college or university studies to complete a baccalaureate degree. Students often take considerably longer than the initial two years to finish an associate degree or to be prepared to transfer. Articulating with four year institutions is a major tribal college activity.

4. ***to be offered by and to a unique population:***

Most tribal college enrollments have a predominant Native American student population. These are minority students attending a minority institution. Within the confines of the tribal colleges they are sheltered by their own dominant society. Here the values of

tribal culture are fostered and perpetuated to a very high degree.

While interviewing, understanding responses or lack of response, from the Native American student, faculty or staff; evaluators, as outsiders, must be sensitive to all local mission factors.

Size

Tribal colleges tend to have small student enrollments and small numbers of staff and faculty. The first founded largest college is Navajo, with six campuses and several thousand students; the smallest, Menomenee, has under fifty students. Small tribal institutions tend to find solutions to their problems in unique ways. Money is always tight since tribal colleges have historically been under funded. Consequently, staff and faculty undertake many more responsibilities than are expected at larger higher education institutions. Class loads may be considerably heavier and more varied. Faculty all perform other duties ranging from counseling to running the student store, to moving furniture when needed. All staff tend to be involved with many aspects of the college as well as with the reservation community.

Governance and Organization

Tribal colleges are chartered by their respective Tribes meeting the requirements of the Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Act of 1978. Each has undergone a feasibility study by the Bureau of Indian Affairs which sets standards to be met prior to receiving federal funding. Most have a Board of Directors, Trustees or Regents which establishes policy. The college president is directly responsible to the Board. The colleges are also strongly impacted by tribal policies and politics. College Board members are often elected tribal government officials. Frequently the student government president is also a voting member of the tribal college governing Board. Students thereby enjoy a direct voice in policy determination. Many colleges may serve more

than one tribe which requires different languages and cultural approaches to be addressed in curriculum and staffing needs.

Finance and Support

Tribal colleges consistently suffer from insufficient financial resources. The base funding for operation provided under the Tribally Controlled Community College Act is about $3,200 per student annually. The availability of allocated state funds, if present at all, varies among the states. Funding through the Perkins Act for vocational education is limited by formula. Sponsoring tribes tend to be poor themselves and can only provide space and in-kind services but, in most cases, very little money for operation. The colleges must augment their fiscal resources in a variety of creative ways. Many rely heavily on competitive Federal and State grants, raising funds for local foundations, agreements with other institutions to provide classes and facilities, contributions from local and regional industrial donors, and more recently, income from gaming revenue.

Location

Most Tribal colleges are located with in the confines of a reservation serving geographically isolated and dispersed population segments. Some reservations in which a college is located are larger than many European countries while others are small enclaves found in the middle of a National Forest or within the boundaries of a small city. One college serves seven reservations within the boundaries of one state, separated from each other by hundreds of miles. Navajo Community College has six campuses in two states. To overcome distance learning obstacles, tribes are moving toward delivery of courses to remote sectors by inter active television, satellite, modems, and the like. Tribal colleges provide classes when and where they are needed. That often results in some unusual facilities, site locations, and teaching methods.

Facilities

Tribal college facilities are often inadequate, deteriorated and small. Some consist of non-centralized campuses and function in space wherever the tribe has room. Storefronts, post office basements, lofts, abandoned buildings and a remodeled fish processing plant are typical locations which provide the educational environments for tribal colleges. There is little money available to these colleges for bricks and mortar. Evaluators should be sensitized to appreciate the creative use of recycled and remodelled spaces.

Conclusion

Almost thirty independent tribally controlled colleges are chartered in a dozen states and Canada. They vary in quantity from Montana which has the greatest number (seven) to Michigan which has only one to serve seven separate tribes. More than half of all these colleges are within North Central Association's jurisdiction. It is essential that current and future tribal college NCA evaluators develop an appreciation of the uniqueness of these institutions.

Cultural sensitivity on the part of evaluators is pivotal. They emerge from the non-tribal society and enter the tribal college environment to assess accreditation readiness. Evaluators should accept and respect what they find different from their own experience.